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AUTHOR(S):

Yow, Cheun Hoe

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Remembering the Samsui Women: Migration and Social Memory in Singapore and China

Kelvin E. Y. Low

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014, xiv+252p.

The term "Samsui" refers to a specific location in the Pearl River Delta region in Guangdong province, the southern part of China, where many members of the Chinese diaspora trace their ancestral homelands. While the geographic benchmark is certain, the history of Samsui women is open to interpretation and representation from many angles. On the one hand, it is a matter of fact that a significant number of women migrated from that particular place to work in Singapore, largely in the construction industry and to a lesser extent in households and factories. On the other hand, this migration is a subject of imagination and deliberation as to who should be included under the category "Samsui Women" and the kinds of roles they have assumed in relations to Singapore and China. There were women, who hailed from elsewhere in China, taking advantage of the label of "Samsui" in order to gain access to job markers where "Samsui" was a niche. Also, there have been various state projects focusing on Samsui women and their contribution to shaping identities of Singapore as nation.

This book is laudable research on how issues and discourses have been revolving around Samsui women. The author, Kelvin E. Y. Low, is a sociologist at the National University of Singapore. He has succeeded in meeting the objective he sets in the book, revealing the experiences of Samsui women and arguing that "the many reconstructions of their past are utilized by the state, other institutions, and stakeholders towards achieving vested interests in the promotion and maintenance of a national identity" (p. 7).

The primary sources Low has collected are rich, including interviews with Samsui women,

documentaries, art works, and events. To uncover what forces determined the telling of stories and the representation of images concerning Samsui women, he has appropriated concepts of "history" and "memory" as social reconstruction, national identity, and personal narrative. The presentation of findings and discussions are soundly laid out in six chapters: "Chinese Migration and Entangled Histories," "Politics of Memory Making," "Local and Transnational Entanglements," "From China to Singapore," "Beyond Working Lives," and " Samsui Women, *Ma Cheh*, and Other Foreign Workers."

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the subject matter and argument, with a succinct account of the historical backdrop against which various waves and types of migrants made their way to Singapore. Low rightfully reveals the interconnectedness of different sets of networks as well as different spaces of locations spanning China and Southeast Asia, in what he argued as a stunning case of "entangled history." The pictures are variegated and complicated, but Low makes it clear that at the intersections between British expansion and Chinese migration, the decline of silk industry and anti-marriage practices in Guangdong led to the migration of Samsui women to Singapore, thus adding a distinctive female layer to the political and social settings.

Chapters 2 to 6 are in-depth examinations of Samsui women from multiple angles. In Chapter 2, Low shows how Singapore as a new nation-state has crafted its reproduction of history and memory whereby Samsui women have been portrayed as "Chinese migrant women," "pioneers," "feminists," and "elderly women" to meet both the national engineering and social imagination for what kind of heritage has been established in Singapore.

Chapter 3 draws on media reports to trace how identities and images have been formed of Samsui women in terms of both state and ground-level memories. The finding is that they are remembered the same way in both Singapore and China, through three motifs—pioneerhood, issues of longevity, and women retiring to elderly homes in China. Low sharply points out that "in instances (Singapore and China), the experiences and biographical trajectories of the women provide an apt source of history and memory from which the vocabulary of a moral meta-narrative has been generated and disseminated" (p. 106).

Chapters 4 and 5 are an account and examination of the lived experiences of Samsui women, drawing on interviews with them and their kin as well as oral histories and other media sources. In particular, Chapter 4 features personal narratives of Samsui women and focuses on their migration trajectories from China to Singapore. It is clear from these accounts that, in one way or another, Samsui women are different among themselves and also different from the official discourses in terms of migration trajectories, attachments to their fellows, and identification with hometowns and nations. Chapter 5 goes beyond the individual subjectivities of Samsui women to examine their kin networks and their own social circles. The purpose of these two chapters, in Low's own words, is to argue that "whereas instances of hardship are useful memory materials that both carry and reproduce romanticized parts, the narratives here recount hardships are

personal struggles involving constant negotiation, contestation, perseverance . . . that often go unnoticed or become glorified as important historical issues" (p. 146).

Chapter 6 compares and contrasts Samsui women with other groups of immigrants in Singapore, such as *Ma Cheh*, who were female domestic workers who, like Samsui women disappeared over time, and present-day workers, who are largely male and originate from South Asia and China. There are good reasons for this comparative study as it provides a better understanding of how the boundaries have been redrawn constantly to include or exclude certain groups and members in order to achieve national goals and social norms.

In fact, everything and everyone in history are subject to rewriting for a gamut of reasons. Thus, it is just appropriate when Low in his "conclusion" asserts that "the social memory and historiography of the Samsui women are social constructions of the past in which memory and history undergo alteration, reappropriation, and instrumentalization by different social actors through a variety of means and through different goals. Such constructions are forms of knowledge that serve as an anchor for both individual and group identities in shaping belonging" (p. 207).

In short, this book is empirically rich and theoretically intriguing. It is worth recommending to those who are interested in gendered migration and social memory in national history.

Yow Cheun Hoe 游俊豪
School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University

The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi

Nilanjana Sengupta

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 407p.

The female voice of the title of Nilanjana Sengupta's book belongs to four twentieth century women writers and activists: Khin Myo Chit, Ludu Daw Amar, Ma Thida, and Aung San Suu Kyi. *The Female Voice of Myanmar: Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi* traces the course of each of these women's lives and works, identifying the democracy movement of 1988 as the point at which their four stories converge. Sengupta's juxtaposition of these four narratives illuminates the changing political landscape of twentieth century Myanmar from a specifically female perspective.

Sengupta opens her analysis with the story of Supaya-Lat, the last queen of independent Burma. Supaya-Lat was villainized by the generations who came after her as an ambitious and ruthless woman, blamed for the British conquest. She became a frequently invoked example of the catastrophic consequences of undue female influence. By placing this story at the start of her analysis, Sengupta emphasizes the gendered challenges that have existed for any woman in Myanmar who chooses to work actively for political change. The recurring question of how women can